



**Water & Heritage: material, conceptual and spiritual connections**

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*Water & Heritage: material, conceptual and spiritual connections*, edited by  
Willem J. H. Willems & Henk P. J. van Schaik, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015,  
429 pp., £75 (paperback), ISBN 978-90-8890-278-9

*Water & Heritage: material, conceptual and spiritual connections* is an edited  
volume based on papers presented at the conference *Protecting Deltas, Heritage  
Helps!* held in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, between the 23 and 28 September 2013.  
As Jhr Ir Diederik Six (the President of ICOMOS Netherlands) and Dr Erik  
Luijendijk (ICOMOS Netherlands board member) explain in the preface, the purpose  
of the conference was to ‘build bridges between the water and the culture sectors in  
order to protect world’s deltas’ (p.12). The book certainly fulfils this ambition, by  
including twenty-four international case studies, which present the various  
(sometimes harmonious, and sometimes challenging) relationships between  
communities, heritage and water.

Following two short pieces – one introducing the idea of culture as the fourth  
pillar of sustainable development and the other providing a historical overview of  
heritage-focused conventions – the book addresses different issues and strategies  
relating to heritage and water, in different contexts and cultures. Three main themes  
(*Material connections*; *Organisational connections*; and *Spatial, social, cultural and  
spiritual connections*, which should have been made more obvious in the table of  
contents) seem to run throughout the contributions, and demonstrate how complex,  
and yet inspirational, the relationship between humans and water can be.

From India to Italy, from Cambodia to the US, from Jordan to South Korea,  
each chapter presents a story about ‘water heritage in all its diversity’ (p.9). We are  
confronted with stories of resilient communities, stories of challenges successfully

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3 overcome and stories of empowering collaborations. Furthermore, the aesthetic,  
4 technical, social and economical importance of the relationship between heritage and  
5 water is, case study after case study, reiterated. Some examples are discussed in more  
6 detail than others, though they all offer a snapshot of how much water can shape (or  
7 has shaped) the heritage and lives of those who live close to it. For example, in the  
8 chapter titled 'Water and Heritage in Angkor, Cambodia', Peou Hang highlights the  
9 need for rehabilitating the twelfth-century Angkor hydraulic system, not only for the  
10 benefit of the local and cultural environment, but also for the preservation of the  
11 historical monuments and temples. The effectiveness of this ancient hydraulic  
12 structure is a testament to human intelligence: throughout the centuries, this structure  
13 has prevented floods and provided local communities with water availability and new  
14 economic opportunities.

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16 In the initial chapters, the inclusion of further considerations (on the  
17 relationship between local identity and heritage infrastructure) would have opened up  
18 further reflections on the importance that the sense of place has in safeguarding  
19 heritage and its authenticity. This could have led on more smoothly to the next section  
20 of the book, where some contributors place particular emphasis on the difficulty in  
21 striking the balance between authentic preservation (of the heritage site or structure)  
22 and effective protection (of the community). This is especially the case for cultural  
23 heritage and local communities that are affected by the devastating effects of climate  
24 change. There is indeed a tension between preventive mitigation strategies (which  
25 primarily aim to protect the population and its 'material assets') and the risks that  
26 these strategies may pose to often-fragile heritage structures. This idea (protection  
27 versus preservation) is clearly discussed by Heiko Lieske *et al.* through a comparative  
28 study conducted in Germany on heritage conservation, urban development and large-

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scale flood protection schemes. The study concluded that integrative planning procedures offer ‘opportunities to combine up-to-date flood protection with the preservation of urban heritage as well as a general upgrading and stabilization of historic river cities’ (p. 211). Certainly, the collaboration between different organisations is pivotal in developing sustainable and resilient systems that protect communities and preserve heritage. Hence, it is imperative to understand (as pointed out by Katko *et al.*) the institutional, administrative and legal frameworks specific to each country, so that targeted water and heritage management systems can be implemented according to the local natural and social conditions.

Undoubtedly, this book offers an interesting read. It is, first and foremost, a significant compendium of case studies about resilience: the resilience of ancient structures that have survived the ravages of time and natural disasters; and the resilience of communities, across the globe, that have learnt how to live with water. At the same time, the book is a practical resource of examples and concrete actions required to ensure both an effective management of heritage sites as well as the sustainable development of water infrastructure. Therefore, the main merit of the book is that it sends a clear message to policy makers, managers and heritage professionals on the pressing need for the preservation of heritage and the protection of communities in areas where water does not bear only a positive impact.

However, the main strength of the book (a strong collection of international examples), also becomes its weakness: the book ends quite abruptly, with an informative but rather brief document (*The Statement of Amsterdam*) on the conference itself and its key themes. Instead, a closing chapter, highlighting the editors’ critical reflections and connecting the core points discussed throughout the 420-odd pages, would have been very useful. This is, in my view, where the book

needed further attention, so that it offered both a practical and theoretical exploration into the global concerns relating to heritage and water. In this way, the volume would have also provided a more solid and critical platform for further academic work on the subject.

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